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ABSTRACT

The adult community education (ACE) sector in the state of Victoria provides an example of best practice in regional rural policy in Australia that may serve as a model for other areas of government effort. In 1997, 309,000 Victorians enrolled in adult and community education courses, such as business and technical skills development, literacy and English language courses, access and tertiary preparation courses, and general education courses. A network of more than 450 ACE centers and the Council of Adult Education provide adults with opportunities for lifelong learning. Factors contributing to the success of ACE include the following: (1) a powerful relationship between government and the community; (2) promotion of cultural diversity; (3) education that is affordable, cost effective, of high quality, and broad and deep; (4) use of technology to reach rural areas; and (5) addition of value to the community by promoting purpose and belonging. The program has a productive impact on leadership from within and outside the regions in the following ways: it helps to integrate education and training; it promotes community participation in development; it encourages partnerships between communities, business, and government; it provides opportunities for all age groups; it enables the school-to-work transition for youths; and it contributes to the quality of life in the region. (KC)

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Adult Community Education

A Model for Regional Policy Development

The adult community education sector provides an example of success in regional public policy which may be unique in Australia. As an example of best practice in rural policy it may serve as a model for other areas of government effort.

ACE: an introduction

In 1997, 309,000 Victorians enrolled in adult and community education courses. Such courses included business and technical skills development, literacy and English language courses, access and tertiary preparation courses such as return to study or VCE, general adult education including personal growth classes such as assertiveness and yoga, and cultural classes such as languages and art. A network of more than 450 adult and community education (ACE) centres and the larger Council of Adult Education (CAE) provide Victorian adults with the opportunity to participate in lifelong learning. This contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of themselves and their communities, wherever those communities happen to be.

In Victoria, legislation recognises that ACE is an education sector in its own right by virtue of its community ownership and management. The Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board and its nine regional councils are established under legislation to promote, plan for, and allocate funds to ACE. The legislation also recognises that many other agencies, TAFE Institutes and Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) in particular, share a common education program with the ACE sector. This education program is ACFE: adult community and further education.

A powerful relationship between Government and the Community

The ACFE Board and its regional councils are expressive of a powerful relationship between government and the community. ACE providers have a deep sense of commitment to this sector which finds expression at a local level in responsiveness to local needs by ACE providers and community ownership amongst ACE participants. It is also a sector in which the richness of local difference is allowed full play. ACE is a segment of the education sector which has consistently demonstrated that it is sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet local learning and community development needs.

The ACFE Board has worked hard to create a research culture in which a rich dialogue between the community and Government drives policy and planning. ACFE has consciously commissioned research in which community providers and students are partners with Government and are provided with opportunities to talk back to Government. This is a dialogue which cuts both ways and strengthens the relevance and quality of learning for participants in the sector and constantly challenges and refreshes the content and delivery of the learning experiences. Participants and providers jointly own and manage their sector with Government.

Cultural diversity thrives in the ACE sector

The ACE sector provides a rich fabric of learning for cultural diversity across the State. Koorie Education and English as a second language are core activities of ACFE. ACE offers diverse points of delivery for scores of culturally specific programs and instruction in the languages of the world. ACE providers have become expert in releasing the talents and skills of immigrant Australians and allowing these to be applied productively in the broader community.

ACE education is affordable, cost effective and of high quality

It is estimated that the community drives each dollar contribution of the Government four times further than the initial investment in ACFE funded services. Whilst Government dollars provide an anchor of security for the sector, the successful volunteer base and the fees charged by providers achieve a multiplier effect on the Government investment. A sense of community ownership is key to this financial efficiency.

A 1998 national consultation on the conceptual framework for Further Education – *Transforming Lives Transforming Communities* – confirmed:

- that the Victorian ACE sector is the most developed ACE sector in Australia
- that ACE makes a unique contribution to communities across Australia and makes the greatest contribution where it is best developed.

The MCEETYA ACE Task Force endorsement of *Transforming Lives Transforming Communities* strongly suggests that the ACE sector in Victoria presents a pinnacle in adult education delivery and provides the best basis for consolidation of curriculum approaches anywhere across the nation.

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ACE: A MODEL FOR REGIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT *from page 5*

The ACE sector has reach, depth and breadth

A measure of the *breadth* of the ACE sector is the fact that ACE providers operate in virtually every regional community across Victoria - 468 delivery sites in all. Most small towns which no longer have a bank will have an adult learning centre in their mechanics institute, community hall or library. Such centres are prized possessions in beleaguered rural communities and are small engine rooms of community development, social capital and business enterprise.

As well as generating massive social capital within communities, ACE providers have been assisted to develop strategic links with TAFE providers (*depth*) which add value to the learning and pre-employment training which they provide.

A model of technological engagement

Recent policy debates have underscored the store which people living in rural and remote areas of Australia place in information and communications technology. Because of the reciprocal dialogue which exists between Government and the community within the ACE sector, this is a fact which has long been recognised and integrated into this area of Government activity. It is a tacit principle of the ACE sector that participation in learning should be independent of barriers of location. Information technology helps underpin this principle. Distance education is a feature of the sector.

Despite its modest level of resourcing, the ACE sector in Victoria is one of the most technically literate in communications technology in the State. Virtually every provider has Internet and email access. A culture of application of this technology to learning and communication is now pervasive and deeply embedded.

ACE is bigger than education: a vast exchange of social capital

ACE is a rich source of education for communities across Victoria but it is far more than this. In simple terms ACE adds to the value of community life, generates purpose and belonging, and builds a sense of connectedness which strengthens community resilience and confidence to participate in rapid State, national and global change.

For a sector with limited resources ACE has an impact in almost every area of community life. Regional Directors of ACFE participating in Government regional policy development forums have been able to identify the following areas in which ACE has a productive impact:

❑ Leadership from within and outside regions

A regional council operates in each of ACFE's nine regions and is chaired by a highly respected member of the ACE community. The council and its chair work closely with the director and education officer of their region in dynamic, cooperative relationships. The regional infrastructure dovetails with the central structure of the ACFE Board and ACFE Division. The Chair of the statewide ACFE Board has undertaken to visit every region in Victoria in 1998 and is on track to achieve this aim. The Chair's tour is an exercise in leadership and in maintaining the powerful reciprocal dialogue which informs all aspects of the ACFE Board's policy work.

❑ Integration of education and training

The strategic relationships which link ACE providers and TAFE Institutes create two directional pathways between education and vocational training. It is of the nature of the ACFE sector that education and training cohabit in ACE providers. This relationship is accepted as natural and mutually productive.

❑ Community participation/ ownership in adjustment and development

Users of ACE have a profound investment in the sector borne of the empowerment with which it has often provided them. This has occurred through opening such doors as:

- TAFE through basic education and preparatory courses
- tertiary study through the adult VCE
- a broader cultural landscape through cultural enrichment and personal development courses
- employment through basic education, pre-employment or vocational education programs
- a wider social network and the world of the written word through literacy, ESL and language programs.

❑ Partnerships between communities business and government

The structure of the relationship between regional councils and regional ACFE staff make this a powerful example of a community - government relationship. ACE providers also act as repositories of information technology intelligence which provide a rich potential source for regional businesses. Strategic partnerships between community providers and regional businesses exist in a range of forms in many smaller communities.

❑ Opportunities for the community young and old

ACE providers give adults a second chance at education and it is not unusual for retired people to sit in adult VCE classes beside 19 year olds returning to study. In regional communities, which often have older populations than most and where youth unemployment rates are highest, this is extremely important. The potential for intergenerational

richness in relationships is perfectly captured by the ACE model for provision.

Developing a regional identity
ACE providers are central to the identity of local communities and, because of their defined regional groupings in ACFE regions and the distinct character of community based Regional Councils, the ACE sector casts an important influence on regional identity as well.

Employment trends - opportunities for all including youth
ACE providers present an opportunity for young people for whom the more formal structures of school and TAFE have proved daunting and exclusive. For such young people, the flexibility and informality of learning within the adult community education sector provides an opportunity to build confidence in a supportive environment, identify new strengths and take the first steps towards employment.

Quality of life - access to services, recreation and cultural facilities and activities
The community orientation of adult community education allows for the creation of an environment which blends educational, cultural and recreational experiences while linking people into broader social networks and support services. The skills developed through participation in ACE programs provide some adults with the confidence to become their own advocates for the first time in their lives.

Ensuring that the region is attractive to live, work and conduct business
ACE providers play a critical role in proving that smaller centres have a lifeblood of their own, in tapping that lifeblood and enriching the internal resources of smaller communities.

By Peter Jones, Policy Officer, ACFE Division, Office of Training and Further Education.

ACFE Regional Planning:
Best practice in catering for current markets and future trends

The ACFE Board and ACFE regional councils share a common purpose and values in their commitment to the future of adult, community and further education provision in Victoria. The strategic directions formulated by the ACFE Board, serve as the foundation for the development of regional councils' business and/or operational plans which contextualise the strategic statewide directions.

The development of a strategically based business or operational plan is primarily the responsibility of each regional council. An on-going cycle of planning allows councils to re-evaluate and reshape their priorities in response to the shifting demands and developments in their region.

The documented plan outlines each regional council's approach to addressing its core business and promoting the growth and development of ACFE, however it is the attention to the planning process that enables regional councils' to link with the ACFE Board plan and address its legislative responsibilities. Whilst statewide directions form the framework for planning, the vision, mission and values of each regional council, its staff, and wider community drive the planning and inform their respective decision making processes.

In 1997, ACFE Northern Metropolitan Regional Office staff undertook a project which documented the issues and processes for best practice in regional planning. The project findings were informed by a series of professional development sessions where each of the ACFE regional office staff were involved in exploring generic and specific issues of planning, particularly as they relate to strategic, business and operational planning. The findings have since been published as the *Best Practice in Regional Council Planning Resource Kit*.

ACFE regional councils have addressed these issues and elements of 'best practice' in planning in unique ways, in response to the needs of their communities and their providers.

Eastern Metropolitan, Central Highlands Wimmera and Barwon South Western Regions have formalised their processes of planning with cyclical attention to: review; planning; implementation; review; evaluation and improvement. These regions have developed strategic plans of up to three years, based on on-going, formal and informal consultations with community organisations, data from Australian Bureau of Statistics, higher degree research, focus groups, as well as feedback from providers and local agencies. Consensus and consultation with regional providers is considered crucial within planning and decision-making processes.

For more information regarding the *Best Practice in Regional Council Planning Resource Kit* contact:

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